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THE AIM OF THE ENGLISH COURSE

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The methods and content of our course in English ought to depend upon our answer to the fundamental question, What is the aim of this course? Possibly there would be a somewhat general agreement that our aim is, first, to secure power in oral and written expression; second, to develop a discriminating taste for literature; third, to secure some loving acquaintance with the best literature.

Does our course in English as administered at present achieve these ends?

1. Does it secure on the part of our pupils power in oral and written expression? We find an answer to this question in the chorus of complaints from the colleges and the business men to whom our students go at the end of the high-school course. We find, for instance, that Harvard University thinks it necessary to send out to the schools a pamphlet stating the most flagrant errors in English among its Freshmen. Everywhere the answer is the same. The colleges cannot sufficiently condemn our product so far as its training in English is concerned. Business men tell us that our graduates cannot write a decent letter, that they are unable to spell and punctuate acceptably; in short, their anathemas are fully as vigorous as are those of the colleges.

It is altogether possible that both colleges and business men have failed to take into account some elements of the problem, such as our immense numbers and the large proportion of pupils from a home environment of foreign languages and street slang, but in spite of this we must admit that much is to be desired in our results in English composition. When we reflect that in addition to the discipline of the English classes nearly all of the pupils have had Latin and one modern foreign language, the case against our present course is materially strengthened.

2. Does our present practice develop a discriminating taste for literature? Up to date the answers to this question have been almost entirely empirical. An answer could be secured in the most scientific way if we could ascertain how many of our graduates re-read the literature studied in high school or have enough interest aroused by those books to cause them to read other books by the same author. Until an answer is secured in this way we shall be obliged to depend on mere guesses.

3. The answer to the third question is likewise one which can be given only as a matter of opinion. Some acquaintance with good literature our graduates certainly have; a loving acquaintance at best is probably rare. The writer's opinion that we are failing to develop either a discriminating taste or a love for the best in literature rests largely on an experiment followed for some years as head of a department of English in a high school. The English course was that prescribed by the Regents of New York State, which is practically determined by the Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools of the Middle States and Maryland. For several years the pupils of the graduating classes were asked to write *unsigned* papers, answering somewhat detailed questions on the course. The papers were written with the most emphatic assurance that no individual would ever be held accountable for the views expressed, and indeed that there would not be the slightest effort made to discover who wrote any answer or made any suggestion. The result of this investigation showed clearly that when literature was studied with the minuteness necessary for detailed answers on matters of allusion, structure, comparison, and style, the pupils almost invariably left the book with disgust and with a determination never to touch it again. On the other hand, books that were read less thoroughly for their broader relation to human life aroused great enthusiasm on the part of the students. To be explicit, a play of Shakespeare's studied with constant reference to voluminous notes, with careful analysis of the structure of the plot, with close study of the obsolete words and of all allusions to matters of contemporary history and custom, was so embalmed that the students never wished to look at it again. The same play, handled by a teacher who was herself a splendid reader and who emphasized

the dramatic interest, was read and re-read voluntarily by the pupils. Many of them testified that without making any particular effort to do so, they found that they had memorized considerable portions of the play, that quotations came to them readily as called forth by occasions in their own lives, and that an interest had been aroused which had led them to read and to attend other plays.

Possibly my own conclusions as to the answers to questions 2 and 3 have been drawn from insufficient data and from temperamental bent. The answers are given with the full consciousness that they are not scientific; they are at least strong evidence that we have not in our courses in English developed either discrimination or love for the best in literature.

Have we aimed at the wrong thing? Whatever may be our theory as to the reason for teaching literature, we have, consciously or unconsciously, taught for knowledge rather than for power. The reason for this is perfectly clear when we consider the history of English teaching in the high schools for the last twenty years. At the beginning of this period the study of English literature meant literary biography, periods of literary history, lists of books, and the characteristics of style of the various authors. Little or nothing of the author's work was really read. In other words, "English Literature" was a knowledge subject. It was considered that a cultured person must know *about* authors.

The study of the English classics was begun on the same theory, which we must admit was somewhat saner when applied to the classic itself than when applied merely to the life of the author. The teachers of literature for the most part had been trained in the ancient classics, and they applied in their teaching of literature the same methods of minute dissection with which they had treated Homer and Virgil. When knowledge of the English classics was made a part of the entrance requirements of colleges, the examination set a pace which could be kept up only by the same careful study. Thus we have dissected the rose only to find that the scent has vanished.

Our training in composition began with long themes, largely reproductions of the classics read. This was natural, as it was only a step from the writing of translations from a foreign language into

English to the writing of translations of great literature into the poverty-stricken vocabulary of the high-school pupil. If any poison were lacking to complete the destruction of a lurking fondness for our glorious literature, the composition class furnished it. It was not an anaesthetic either. The written theme was a nightmare to the pupil and a night-grind to the teacher. Worst of all it served little use as a training in composition, for it was an effort to do something that the pupil had no desire to do and knew very well he would never have to do except as a school task.

A frank recognition of our fundamental aim in teaching literature will revolutionize our methods. In the first place, our choice of books will be determined, not on the basis of a complete survey of the field of literature, but by the tastes and abilities of the boys and girls at the given stage of their progress. We shall not require them to amble along on Chaucer's palfrey, bored by the Clerk, the Squire, and the Nonne Preeste, when they are at home in the camps of outlaws and the cabins of buccaneers. We shall discard epochs and classifications and seek always the best that will appeal to the interests of the class. We shall conform to the doctrine that education is the process of developing the child from what he is to what he ought to be rather than to our recent practice of leading him from where he isn't to where he doesn't want to go.

On this principle our choice of literature will be much broader than might be supposed, because our method will be so changed that much that has seemed impossible will be found most interesting. For example, we shall read Scott much as we who were not *taught* the English classics read him. The teacher will hasten over the first thirty to sixty pages, get the class fairly absorbed in the story, and then—GET OUT OF THE WAY. She will not assign "the next chapter," she certainly will not take the time of twenty-five recitations to drag under her pedantic arc light every rainbow tint of the story by the "what next" method, she will not exact themes on Rebecca's lacerated affections or Friar Tuck's bibulous lucubrations. She will give Scott a chance, and incidentally her pupils will read about five times as much and like it more than five times as well. By thus directing the tastes the right way, the reading mania, which seems to be a pretty general phenomenon of

adolescence, may be made to contribute to the literary culture and to the intellectual resourcefulness of later years.

When the attitude of the class toward the school literature is thus revolutionized, the teacher can approach more difficult books with assurance. Literature of varied types can be discovered to the class. More and more of the technical difficulties will be solved because of the intelligent curiosity of the pupils. Thus a four years' course will eventuate not only in a greater knowledge, but also in a discriminating taste that will be rich in its promise of literary culture.

Possibly our progress in teaching composition has been greater than in teaching literature. The disheartening process of challenging comparison between our pupils' feeble efforts and the masterpieces we are violating by an impious and unnatural effort at reproduction is happily becoming less common. We are seeing the problem more clearly and are assigning themes from the daily lives of the pupils, only insisting that in their efforts they make us and their fellows see and hear and feel and think with them. Our standards are not Shakespeare, Macaulay, or Emerson, but Mary Jones, who is the best writer in the class. True, Shakespeare *et al.* must affect the writing of the pupils, but their influence, if it is to be worth anything, must be unconscious.

We are using less red ink, too, to the infinite improvement of our eyesight and our tempers. Some of us saw our laboriously annotated themes cast indifferently into the waste basket, and took the hint; some with "ingrowing consciences" continued to plod our weary way to the waiting midnight lamp and the red ink bottle; some would hurl the rubicund missile at the heretic who questions the divinity of the god of things as they are. Cheer up, sister; soon you can be happy though—a teacher of English.

What shall we do? Let's make our theme assignments as short as possible, teach one thing at a time, hammer on that, have a great deal of work in class, go around while the work is being done as the teacher of science does in the laboratory, on stated days have the class time used as a study period while we give conferences, see as many pupils for conference as we can at off hours and before and after school, have other days for pupils to read their

themes in class for criticism and comment by pupils and teacher, hold up the best as a model and send the rest home to endeavor to do as well; then use the time we formerly spent in red-inking themes for anything from vaudeville to a Browning club.

It has recently occurred spontaneously to a considerable number of people that live inhabitants of our terraqueous void are apt to talk more than they write—in fact, that everyone talks a good deal every day and that comparatively few write at all. At the same time the “gross materialist,” “the time servers,” the “almighty-dollar educationists” have suggested that a man’s success in life is apt to depend very largely on his address and conversation. By this process we have another of those pestiferous disturbances of the good old days of classico-mathematical “culture”—another “fad and frill,” called oral expression. Go to, then. What shall we say to this intruder? Shall we not say: Come in, youngster; you may be another camel’s nose in the Tory educational tent, but the practical subjects have the call, and we shall be branded as “stand-patters” if we do not give you a cordial reception? The result will be, I suppose, that we shall have to use some of our valuable time in which we might be increasing the net total of Latin and algebra in the world, drilling on such perfectly uncultural and unacademic attainments as good articulation, distinct enunciation, correct emphasis, inflection, pitch, coloring, tone, etc., in giving expression to literature and to daily speech.

Can we forget tradition and attack our problem *de novo*? Can we agree that the aims of our course are power in oral and written expression, discriminating taste for literature, loving acquaintance with the best literature? Can we test our selection of books and our method of treatment by these ends and these alone? Can we, in other words, study our problem on its merits and apply ordinary business sense to finding the solution?